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Family poisoned on St. John recovering as EPA investigates

25 Mar 2015

The Virgin Islands Daily News

By ALDETH LEWIN Daily News Staff

The family of four that was poisoned while vacationing on St. John is now receiving medical treatment in the states, and a family spokesman said their conditions are critical but stable and improving.

Methyl bromide, the chemical believed to have sickened a family vacationing at a condominium on St. John, is restricted as a pesticide due to its "acute toxicity," according to its warning label.

While the investigation into the chemical that caused the poisoning is ongoing, it seems to have originated with a pesticide used by Terminix in the same building where the family was staying at Sirenusa Condominium Resort in Cruz Bay.

Environmental Protection Agency investigators, working with the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources, were at the site Tuesday to collect samples.

Local real estate company, Sea Glass Vacations, acts as the rental agent for several units at Sirenusa, including Villa Capri.

Villa Capri was rented by Steve Esmond, his wife, Theresa Devine, and their two teenage sons from March 14 through Sunday.

EPA spokesman Elias Rodriguez said that EPA investigators took air samples from the condo at Sirenusa on Tuesday.

"The unit where the family was staying was sampled," he said. "Those samples will be extracted at an EPA-certified lab and analyzed."

The process could take about a week to get confirmed results, Rodriguez said.

He said EPA investigators will be at the site again today continuing to collect samples.

The family's spokesman, James Maron, an attorney from Wilmington, Del., said Tuesday that all family members' conditions, while serious, are stable and improving. He said the two boys

remain in critical condition.

"Family members and friends remain positive and thank all for support and prayers," Maron said in a written statement he issued Tuesday.

On Friday, Emergency Medical Technicians responded to a call that four people staying at the Sirenusa Condominium Resort were extremely sick.

Schneider Hospital Chief Nursing Officer Darice Plaskett said the four people were transported from Cruz Bay, St. John, to the hospital on St. Thomas.

When they arrived at Schneider Hospital, they were in stable but critical condition and plans were made to transfer them to the states for treatment.

By Tuesday, the family had all been transferred to off-island facilities.

Sea Glass Vacations released a statement Tuesday confirming that authorities are actively investigating the incident and suspect that the illnesses are because of chemicals used for pest control.

"The unit immediately below Villa Capri was recently treated for pests by Terminix, however, Villa Capri itself had not been so treated," the Sea Glass Vacations statement said.

Sea Glass Vacations said it does not treat the units it manages for pests, but contracts that work out to licensed professionals.

"We are committed to full cooperation with all the authorities currently investigating this matter. However, as a rental management company, we generally do not share information about the affairs of our clients and customers with the media, and therefore will not comment further at this time," Sea Glass Vacations said in the prepared statement.

While no one answered at the local Terminix offices on St. Thomas Tuesday, a call to the corporate offices was returned with a prepared statement: "The safety of our customers and employees is our top priority. As such, we are cooperating fully with local and federal officials to determine the cause of the incident reported in St. John. At this time, we have limited details so we cannot comment further on the matter."

Henry Valbuena, vice president of operations for Orkin Pest Control in the Caribbean, said his company was contacted by DPNR on Friday for assistance in the matter.

Orkin has a contract with the Sirenusa property for pest control, but they do not do fumigation using methyl bromide, which is the toxic chemical suspected of making the Esmond family sick, according to the EPA.

"It's an unfortunate and tragic situation," Valbuena said. "It's definitely negligence."

The use of methyl bromide in the United States is restricted because of its acute toxicity, EPA officials said Monday.

"Only certified applicators are allowed to use it in certain agricultural settings, and it is not authorized for use in dwellings. Health effects of acute exposure to methyl bromide are serious and include central nervous system and respiratory system damage," EPA officials said in a statement the federal agency issued Monday.

Valbuena said all pest control professionals are trained to follow the label, which contains specifics about how a chemical can be used safely.

"It's not the product. It's not the chemical. It comes down to the applicator," he said.

He said the poisoning of the family on St. John is bad for everyone.

"It obviously has affected this poor family who came for vacation, and it's affecting the credibility of all of us in pest control," he said.

Valbuena is an entomologist who has been working in the pest control trade for 18 years.

He said methyl bromide should not be used inside structures.

A thorough inspection of the property should have been done ahead of time to ensure that no people, pets, or even plants were in the area exposed to the chemical, he said.

"It's just very unfortunate," Valbuena said. "It's a very unfortunate event, and we all want to learn from it."

Pesticide may have sickened Delaware family in the Caribbean

Associated Press

By RANDALL CHASE, March 24, 2015

DOVER, Del. (AP) — Federal environmental officials say a pesticide believed to contain a chemical that is prohibited for residential use was applied at a Virgin Islands resort where several members of a Delaware family became seriously ill.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials said Tuesday that methyl bromide is suspected of being used last week at the Sirenusa Condominium Resort in Cruz Bay, St. John, where the Esmond family from Wilmington, Delaware, was staying.

James Maron, an attorney for the family, said Tuesday that Steve Esmond, his wife, Dr. Theresa Devine, and their two teenage sons, were being treated at hospitals in the United States. Esmond is head of the middle school at The Tatnall School, a private college preparatory school in suburban Wilmington. His wife is a dentist.

"Their conditions, while serious, are stable and improving," Maron's law office said in a prepared statement. "The boys remain in critical condition."

The EPA has identified Memphis, Tennessee-based Terminix as the company that applied the chemical.

Michael Wassmer, a spokesman for Terminix, said in an emailed statement that the safety of its customers and employees is a top priority for the company.

"As such, we are cooperating fully with local and federal officials to determine the cause of the incident reported in St. John," Wassmer said. "At this time, we have limited details so we cannot comment further on the matter."

Representatives of Sea Glass Vacations, a rental agent for several units at Sirenusa, said in a written statement that it was aware that a family that rented Villa Capri from March 14 to March 22 became seriously ill and were taken to a hospital for treatment.

"The unit immediately below Villa Capri was recently treated for pests by Terminix, however, Villa Capri itself had not been so treated," the statement read, adding that Sea Glass is committed to fully cooperating with authorities.

EPA spokesman Elias Rodriguez said investigators began collecting air samples Tuesday in the unit where the Esmond family stayed for analysis at an EPA-certified lab in New Jersey. He said it would probably take a week to get the results of the lab tests.

According to warning labels, inhalation of methyl bromide vapors can cause serious acute illness or death, or delayed lung and nervous system injuries. The vapor is odorless and nonirritating to skin and eyes, meaning exposure to toxic levels may occur without warning or detection.

Terminix Identified as Company in Sirenusa Chemical Poisoning

VI SOURCE

BY LYNDA LOHR — MARCH 24, 2015

The investigation continued Tuesday into how four Delaware residents on vacation at Sirenusa condominiums on St. John came to suffer what appears to be chemical poisoning. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency spokesman Elias Rodriguez said the company that used the pesticide containing methyl bromide was identified as the St. Thomas-based Terminix.

The Terminix office was closed for the day late Tuesday afternoon.

The EPA said Monday that the pesticide may have been used to fumigate a room at the resort on March 18. The Delaware family got sick on March 20, and was rushed to Roy L. Schneider Hospital on St. Thomas after suffering from seizures.

The News Journal, a Delaware newspaper, said in its Tuesday story that the four remain in critical condition at unidentified stateside hospitals.

The four are Steve Esmond, his wife Theresa Devine, and their two children, Ryan and Sean.

Rodriguez said the EPA crew took air samples on Tuesday in the Sirenusa unit occupied by the family. They were sent to an EPA-approved laboratory for testing.

"They're taking more samples tomorrow," Rodriguez said.

According to the EPA website, methyl bromide is an odorless, colorless gas that has been used as a soil fumigant and structural fumigant to control pests across a wide range of agricultural sectors.

Because methyl bromide depletes the stratospheric ozone layer, the amount of methyl bromide produced and imported in the U.S. was reduced incrementally until it was phased out in Jan. 1, 2005, to meet the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer Protocol and the United States Clean Air Act.

There are some exceptions to the ban on using methyl bromide but they deal with pest control in agriculture.

St. John resident Todd Roskin, a licensed pesticide operator who owns St. John Solutions, said that while pesticides containing methyl bromide were phased out, an equally hazardous chemical called Vikane is now in use.

He said it's not the toxicity that may have caused the problem at Sirenusa, however, but the application. He said instructions for using those chemicals call for evacuating the entire building when it's a multi-unit building. He said if it's a small area that needs attention, the pesticide operator is supposed to construct a tent around the area. Large areas called for the entire building to be tented, he said.

"The gas stays there for 48 hours," he added. After that, the fumigated building or area needs to remain vacant for another day.

"It's about a three-day procedure," he said.

Roskin said it's possible for the fumigation gas to travel from room to room through the electrical conduits.

He said that while many people exterminate for insects like roaches and ants, when pesticides containing methyl bromide and Vikane are used, it's because the wood in the building is infested with dry wood termites or powder post beetles that live inside the wood and destroy it.

"It's not routine pest control," he said.

Roskin also pointed out that there is a difference between fumigation and extermination. He said fumigation is when a gas like the pesticide containing methyl bromide and Vikane are used. Extermination is when a liquid is spread on areas where insects live or leave trails.

Del. family poisoned in Virgin Islands has 'stabilized'

Cris Barrish,

The News Journal 4:43 p.m. EDT March 24, 2015

A Tatnall School administrator and his family poisoned by a banned pesticide at a luxury resort in the U.S. Virgin Islands "have stabilized and are showing improvement" after returning to the United States, their spokesman said Tuesday.

Steve Esmond, the head of Tatnall's middle school; his wife, Dr. Theresa Devine; and two teen sons were sickened during a vacation in the Caribbean island of St. John.

The boys, who are in 11th and 9th grade, respectively, at Tatnall, remain in critical condition but all four are getting "tremendous medical care stateside," said Wilmington lawyer James J. Maron, who is acting as the family spokesman. Maron would not say where the family is being treated, citing their need for privacy while recuperating.

Meanwhile, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency investigators are conducting air samples of the \$800-a-night unit at Sirenusa resort, officials said Tuesday.

The EPA said they suspect the family was exposed to the pesticide methyl bromide after it was used to fumigate a room at the complex on Wednesday, March 18, four days after the Esmonds arrived for an eight-night stay. The family began showing ill effects on Friday, when they began having seizures, Maron said.

They were taken to island hospitals and airlifted back to America by Monday, Maron said.

Methyl bromide is an odorless pesticide that can be fatal or cause serious central nervous system and respiratory system damage, according to the EPA.

Because of its "acute toxicity," the pesticide is restricted in the United States and its territories, such as the Virgin Islands, to outdoor use only by certified applicators in certain agricultural settings, the EPA said Monday. Methyl bromide liquid and vapors do not irritate the skin and can take a couple of days before symptoms ranging from mild to serious appear, according to the EPA.

Investigators have confirmed that methyl bromide was applied inside units at the Sirenusa resort "to deal with indoor bugs," and that the agency knows who applied the chemical, said Judith Enck, administrator for EPA's region 2, which includes the Virgin Islands.

Investigators will be "working backward" to determine if other tenants have become ill at Sirenusa or other places where the contractor has fumigated rooms, she said by phone Tuesday from St. Thomas. "It's possible people have fallen ill and not known it."

The agency is taking the Esmonds' poisoning "very seriously," Enck said. "We've got resources on the ground and we need to find out exactly what happened and we're also focused on ensuring that this doesn't happen again."

The Capri is one of 22 Sirenusa villas, many managed and marketed by Sea Glass Vacations.

David Adams, manager of St. John operations for Sea Glass Vacations, issued a written

statement Tuesday that said the Esmond family, which he did not name, rented the Capri for nine days, from March 14 through March 22, which was Sunday.

The condo below the Esmonds' villa "was recently treated for pest by Terminix, however, Villa Capri itself had not been so treated," Adams wrote.

Adams wrote that Sea Glass "does not treat the unit it manages for pests but instead relies on licensed professionals for pest control service," and referred all questions to Terminix.

Mary Clare Jensen, a spokeswoman for Memphis, Tennessee-based Terminix, said Tuesday in a statement that "we are cooperating fully with local and federal officials to determine the cause of the incident reported in St. John. At this time, we have limited details so we cannot comment further."

While Maron credited U.S. Sen. Chris Coons, of Delaware, a close friend of the Esmond family, for getting the EPA involved, Enck said her agency would have been done the same for anyone stricken in the United States or territories within its jurisdiction.

"We would have handled this exactly the same whether or not it was a prominent family," Enck said, adding that EPA staffers visited the family at the hospital in the island of St. Thomas on Sunday and connected doctors there with federal medical experts.

Esmond and Devine are both 49, and their sons are high school students at Tatnall – a prestigious private school in Greenville. The Esmonds lives in Wilmington. Esmond has been at Tatnall for 26 years, and has been a high school history teacher and head football coach.

Maron said that "as the EPA investigation proceeds I await their results. The family went down there for quality time and obviously it's just devastating."

Maron said the chemicals "bio-accumulated and metabolized until it became an acute poisoning." Over the weekend, he said, the family "began having seizures in the middle of the night and their lungs stopped working. They all had to be intubated. This is serious stuff."

Charles A. Tierney, Tatnall's head of school, sent out a notice Sunday to families at the school about the Esmonds' misfortune, and said the community has offered whatever support the family needs.

Tierney described Esmond as a "great school person" who has been head of the middle school, which serves about 130 fifth- to eighth-graders, for the last decade.

"In many ways this is hard to fathom," Tierney said Monday. "It's really so unbelievable. We are all rallying together behind the Esmonds and sending them our prayers and healing wishes."

The Capri in St. John is one of 22 Sirenusa villas managed and marketed by Sea Glass Vacations, according to its Internet listing.(Photo: Sea Glass Vacations)

Video: Delaware family sickened by pesticide at resort in U.S. Virgin Islands

ABC Philly

A Delaware family is back home and in the hospital after getting sick while on vacation.

By Chad Pradelli

Tuesday, March 24, 2015 05:06PM

PHILADELPHIA (WPVI) --

A Delaware family is back home and in the hospital after getting sick while on vacation, and they're blaming a chemical used in their hotel room in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Environmental Protection Agency suspects Steve Esmond, his wife Dr. Theresa Devine, and their two teenage boys were poisoned by the powerful pesticide methyl bromide.

The two boys, Sean and Ryan, are currently in critical condition at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Their parents are at another hospital in stable condition.

Methyl bromide is a fumigant used to treat for mold, insects and rodents. It's believed a room at the Sirenusa Resort where the family was staying in the US Virgin Islands was treated with it.

The pesticide is restricted in the United States.

Dr. Reynold Panettieri is the Director of Airways Biology Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania. He explains, "The toxicity that you see is inhaled toxicity and neurologic toxicity - both acute and chronic. Acute shortness of breath... the lining in your lungs actually leak."

Esmond is the head of Tatnall Middle School, a prestigious private school in Greenville, Delaware. Ryan and Sean attend the high school there.

The family is well liked and well connected in Delaware.

Oliver Campbell plays football with one of the boys, and tells us, "We're on the football team together. And it couldn't have happened to a better family and better people. They're just one of those families that everyone loves to be around. It's just horrible."

Another schoolmate, Carl Marvin, says, "It's terrifying. I mean, he's been one of my best friends and it's really scary to think that this could happen to somebody that you know."

Sirenusa Resort is run by the Sea Glass Vacations. The EPA is investigating and released a statement that reads part:

"The EPA is actively working to determine how this happened and will make sure steps are taken to prevent this from happening to others at these vacation apartments."

Action News reached out to Sea Glass Vacations, and they sent us the following statement:

"First and foremost, our thoughts and prayers are with the family. Sea Glass Vacations, LLC

acts as a rental agent for several rental units at Sirenusa and elsewhere on St. John, including Villa Capri. Sea Glass is aware that the family that rented Villa Capri from 3/14/15 to 3/22/15 all became seriously ill and were transported to the hospital for treatment. We are also aware that authorities are actively investigating the possibility that the illnesses were due to chemicals used for pest control. The unit immediately below Villa Capri was recently treated for pests by Terminix, however, Villa Capri itself had not been so treated. With respect to questions you may have regarding the application of chemicals, we direct you to Terminix. Sea Glass Vacations does not treat the units it manages for pests but instead relies on licensed professionals for pest control services. We are committed to full cooperation with all the authorities currently investigating this matter. However, as a rental management company, we generally do not share information about the affairs of our clients and customers with the media, and therefore will not comment further at this time."

Dr. Panettieri says the amount of exposure will determine any long term effects.

He says, "Each individual will respond differently. If the dose was substantial enough for a fairly substantial period of time, hours, maybe some of the consequences will not resolve completely."

EPA: Vacationing Family "Seriously Exposed" To Toxic Pesticide While Staying In Luxury Condo

consumerist.com

By Mary Beth Quirk March 24, 2015

When you're staying in a fancy, luxurious vacation condominium at a Caribbean resort, there's a certain expectation that your health won't be seriously threatened. But the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says members of a Delaware family have become seriously ill after their \$800-per-night condo at a resort in the U.S Virgin Islands was possibly fumigated using toxic pesticides normally found in industrial farming.

The parents and their two teenage sons were airlifted back stateside after becoming ill during their vacation in the Caribbean island of St. John, reports USA Today, and have now been stabilized and are getting "tremendous medical care."

Investigators from the EPA are now investigating what poisoned them by taking air samples of their unit at a Sirenusa resort, officials said. The family was reportedly exposed to the pesticide soon after checking in on Wednesday last week, but didn't show symptoms until Friday when they began having seizures.

An EPA administrator said the poison was caused by methyl bromide, an odorless pesticide that can be fatal or cause serious central nervous system and respiratory system damage. It's restricted in the U.S. due to its "acute toxicity," and is only allowed to be used in certain agricultural settings by certified applicators. It is not authorized for use in dwellings," the EPA says.

Investigators say it appears methyl bromide was possibly used to fumigate the family's condo and others "to deal with indoor bugs," and that the agency knows who applied the chemical.

They're now investigating whether or tenants at Sirenusa or other places where the contractor worked to fumigate rooms have become ill.

"We've got resources on the ground and we need to find out exactly what happened and we're also focused on ensuring that this doesn't happen again," Judith Enck, administrator for the EPA's Region 2 said.

The condominium is owned and managed by a company called Sea Glass Vacations, which hasn't commented on the incident.

CBS/AP March 24, 2015, 12:30 PM

Family suffers seizures at Virgin Islands resort;

Officials are investigating whether a toxic pesticide sickened a Delaware family during their vacation in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Attorney James Maron, who spent time with the family on the island of St. John, told The News Journal on Monday that they were being airlifted from the islands.

The four family members -- Steve Esmond, an administrator at The Tatnall School in Wilmington; his wife, Dr. Theresa Devine; and their two teenage sons -- were exposed to a "highly toxic chemical" at their rental condominium, Maron said.

They were hospitalized on Friday after they began having seizures during the night. Maron said the father and two sons were critical condition.

Local authorities and investigators from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are looking into whether they were sickened by methyl bromide, a pesticide which may have been used to fumigate a room at the Sirenusa Condominium Resort in Cruz Bay, St. John, where the family was staying. Methyl bromide is banned for use in dwellings in the U.S. due to its toxicity.

The EPA warns that exposure to methyl bromide can cause dizziness, headache, nausea and vomiting, weakness and collapse. Those initial symptoms can be followed by a buildup of fluid in the lungs and heart irregularities, which can be fatal.

"Pesticides can be very toxic and it is critically important that they be applied properly and used only as approved by EPA," Judith A. Enck, EPA Regional Administrator, said in a statement. "The EPA is actively working to determine how this happened and will make sure steps are taken to prevent this from happening to others at these vacation apartments or elsewhere."

Video: School Headmaster, Wife, Kids Possibly Sickened by Pesticide at Condo in Virgin Islands

NBC Philly

By David Chang

A vacation away should be relaxing, but one local family went into major respiratory trauma after possibly being exposed to toxic chemicals in their St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands rental. NBC10's Tim Furlong has the latest on what is now a federal investigation. (Published Tuesday, Mar 24, 2015)

Updated at 10:40 PM EDT on Tuesday, Mar 24, 2015

The head of a Delaware middle school and his wife are slowly recovering but their children remain in critical condition after they were sickened, possibly by a pesticide, during a vacation in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Stephen Esmond, his wife Dr. Theresa Devine and their two teen sons were staying at the Sirenusa Condominium Resort in Cruz Bay, St. John, Friday when they suddenly became ill, suffering major respiratory trauma.

The family was eventually taken to hospitals in the Philadelphia area. Esmond and his wife are in serious condition while their two sons are in critical condition.

Esmond is the headmaster of Tatnall's Middle School in Wilmington while Dr. Devine is a local dentist. Their two teen sons attend Tatnall's high school.

Officials with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are investigating whether the family was sickened by a pesticide called methyl bromide. EPA officials say the pesticide may have been used to fumigate a room at the resort back on March 18, the same day the family checked in.

The use of methyl bromide is restricted in the United States because of its acute toxicity, according to the EPA. The pesticide is not authorized for use in buildings and only certified applicators are allowed to be used in certain agricultural settings.

Exposure to methyl bromide can cause damage to the central nervous system and respiratory system.

"Pesticides can be very toxic and it is critically important that they be applied properly and used only as approved by EPA," said Judith A. Enck, EPA Regional Administrator. "Protecting people's health in the U.S. Virgin Islands is of paramount importance. The EPA is actively working to determine how this happened and will make sure steps are taken to prevent this from happening to others at these vacation apartments or elsewhere."

Both the EPA and the U.S. Virgin Islands government are investigating the incident.

Tatnall is a college preparatory school for students ages 3 through grade 12. Tatnall is currently on Spring Break but students and staff have shown their support for the family.

"The whole community is pulling for you guys, praying for you guys," said Oiver Campbell, a family friend. "We really wish them the best."

Charlie Tierney, the head of School at Tatnall, also released a statement on Esmond and his

family.

"The Tatnall School family is sending its well-wishes and love to the Esmonds," Tierney wrote. "We will continue to offer our prayers and positive, healing thoughts and support them in any way we can."

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